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The use of social media in the B2B sales process: a meta synthesis

Use of social
media

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to understand how business-to-business organizations use social media during the sales process.

Design/methodology/approach – The meta-synthesis steps methodology (Hoon, 2013) was applied.

Findings – This study presents a theoretical framework and contributes to improved understanding of how business can use social media in the sales process stages. The results allow identifying stages, discussing the integration between marketing and sales and generating benefits for the organization.

Originality/value – The proposed framework helps in understanding the previously performed fragmented studies. This study shows that social media use not only influences the sales process stages and increases the benefits to the business but also works as a mediator in the relation between sales process stages and identified benefits.

Keywords Meta-synthesis, Social media, Sales process, Business-to-business

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Social media is a technology that has been acquiring importance in our daily personal and business lives. It has changed the business scenario because it has offered

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organizations a chance to communicate with clients in a more effective manner (Rapp, Beitelspacher, Grewal, & Hughes, 2013). Social media usage has been a discussion theme for academics and for professionals because it benefits business growth (Lashgari, Sutton-Brady, Solberg Søilen, & Ulfvengren, 2018). More research is required, however, to investigate its use by the sales force (Itani, Agnihotri, & Dingus, 2017).

Gradually, business is becoming aware of the importance of social media usage for client relations and communication (Rodriguez, Peterson, & Krishnan, 2012), in addition to its use as a platform for realizing online campaigns in which marketing actions are performed (Khang, Ki, & Ye, 2012). Despite its relevance, there is no understanding of its impact on organizational activities and how activities performed in the media influence the sales process, thereby generating benefits for the organization.

Businesses sell products and services in a market that has become more competitive. Moreover, a consumer is more careful in his purchase decision-making process because of the considerable amount of available information. Based on these facts, businesses should use new technology to enhance the sales process (Rodriguez, Ajjan, & Peterson, 2016) and allow information exchange with clients (Marshall, Moncrief, Rudd, & Lee, 2012).

Recently, as can be seen in the literature review, studies have investigated the impact of social media on the sales process (Andzulis, Panagopoulos, & Rapp, 2012) in studies that are related to social media use, sales capability and performance (Rodriguez et al., 2012; Rodriguez et al., 2016), as well as in studies that focus on social media use as a tool for customer relationship management (CRM) (Trainor, Andzulis, Rapp, & Agnihotri, 2014). In these studies, there is a consensus that social media helps in the sales process and generates performance. They show some converging aspects by the existence of a relation between the use of social media and sales (Rodriguez et al., 2016).

Other studies have been about social media use and product sales for consumers (B2C). Companies that operate business to business (B2B) have started to explore social media, although there is no understanding of whether its adoption favors sales (Brink, 2017; Siamagka, Christodoulides, Michaelidou, & Valvi, 2015) or its organizational implications (Ngai, Moon, Lam, Chin, & Tao, 2015). B2B companies have a sales process with a larger number of stages that demands considerable effort to build and maintain customer relationships using communication-related tools such as social media (Chang, 2014; Rodriguez et al., 2012).

From the need to understand social media use in B2B negotiations and the lacunas identified in the literature, this meta synthesis aims to answer the following research question:

RQ1. How has social media been used by B2B organizations in the sales process?

To achieve this objective, the meta-synthesis methodology proposed by Hoon (2013) has been applied. It allows the understanding of how companies use social media in the sales process in an exploratory and inductive way since it seeks the information synthesis already addressed in case study qualitative research. Thus, it is possible to gather information to build the theory and subsequently present a theoretical pattern with concepts and new perspectives, thereby contributing to the already existent theory. This study presents the concepts of social media use, sales in B2B organizations, methodology, the results and final considerations.

Social media use

New technologies arise and consolidate themselves in the market as social media, thus influencing the way business is performed. There is a requirement to identify emerging technologies and know-how to operationalize them to be able to add value to organizational activities (Marshall et al., 2012). Social media comprises applications that use the Internet as support and allow creation, sharing and content exchanges by users e.g. YouTube and Facebook (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Social media helps professionals from marketing and sales areas. Both areas use this media to help communicate not only with prospects and clients but also with other stakeholders (Rodriguez et al., 2012). Social media allows sharing of content online, facilitating social interaction and developing online networks (Agnihotri, Kothandaraman, Kashyap, & Singh, 2012).

There is a tendency to use social media to help communicate with clients and to facilitate sales (Itani et al., 2017). Social media use is not sufficient; it is necessary to understand its application in the sales process, which comprises distinct activities. The efforts of those who manage the sales force and support the salespeople are included in these activities (Guenzi, Sajtos, & Troilo, 2016). This management aims to guide team efforts to the correct usage of tools. Managers need to define how much to invest in social media. They ought to understand how social media can be used in practice to support sales activities and engender a relationship with clients (Trainor et al., 2014).

Some studies show that social media use is valuable to improve sales (Marshall et al., 2012), and its use contributes to organizational results (Rodriguez et al., 2012). Moreover, to establish the relationship between the business and consumers and in B2B negotiations, social media use and sales activities are important (Rapp et al., 2013). Social media use is a strategy that can be applied in B2B (Siamagka et al., 2015) contexts to understand and develop customer relationships (Chang, 2014).

Sales in business to business organizations

B2B organizations usually have fewer customers and need to manage the relationship using information technology systems (Chang, 2014). However, the adoption and implementation of new technologies is a challenge because of the complexity of the B2B sales process, which has a greater number of stages (Agnihotri, Dingus, Hu, & Krush, 2016; Rodriguez et al., 2012; Siamagka et al., 2015).

A sale starts with the acquisition of clients in the market and comprises activities arranged into different stages. D'Haen and Van den Poel (2013) proposed a framework that divided the sales process into different stages related to the purchase funnel. The first stage is the prospection of new potential clients (suspects). Second, the qualification of these suspects according to the criteria defined by the business (prospects). Third, contact is made with the prospects who are prepared to become an opportunity (qualified leads). Lastly, qualified leads are prepared to become real business opportunities. In this framework, the authors did not mention the post-sale stage, which involves tasks that aim to enhance client satisfaction and loyalty (Dombrowski & Malorny, 2016) because the model focuses on client acquisition.

Andzulis et al. (2012) cited the sales process stages and included follow-up activities after sales closing. The stages are client acquisition, approach, understanding client requirements, business opportunities, solution presentation, closing sales and the final client follow-up.

Methodology

The eight-step meta-synthesis methodology by [Hoon \(2013\)](#) was applied in this study ([Table 1](#)). For case selection, the following keywords were searched: “social media” AND “sales*”. The parameter - * - was used because of the need to search for words related to sales, such as sales process and salesperson, because it is the salesperson who performs the sales activities that uses social media. The databases used were Web of Knowledge and ProQuest. For a more assertive selection, filters were selected: “title, abstract and keywords”, “article”, in the area of “applied social science and business” in the last five years of publication. 173 study papers were then identified in the search on Web of Knowledge and 127 in ProQuest. A total of 261 study papers were found because some of them were in both databases. These studies were published in 133

Meta-Synthesis steps	Analytical objective	Strategy or analytical procedure used	Result that generated a theoretical contribution
1 Research question development	Readings about the proposed theme to identify a theoretical lacuna	The initial search for articles in the database	Theoretical lacuna identification and research question development
2 Discovery of relevant research	Relevant publication identification in the database	Research for the keywords “social media” and “sales” in the Web of Knowledge and ProQuest	Sample of 261 articles, among them 25 case studies
3 Inclusion and exclusion criteria	Establish inclusion and exclusion criteria from selected articles	Abstract reading to criteria identification. Reading of 25 case studies	Selection of seven studies
4 Data extraction and data coding	Codify the characteristics of the selected research papers and identify insights	Research paper detailed reading to tabulate the information and insights	Data organization and the elaboration of a table with coding
5 Case-specific level analysis	Identification and analysis of variables: social media and sales process	Casual links identification among variables	Themes, concepts and pattern identification
6 Synthesis on a transversal level	Matching of specific causal links of each case in a net aiming for the generation of a pattern among the variables	Study variables classification and presentation of the relationship found among the cases	Pattern and model identification with the study variables, which are classified to guarantee research validity
7 Theory construction from meta synthesis information	Identification of social media uses in different stages of the sales process as the two of them together generate benefits	The results were grouped according to their theoretical relevance	Theoretical framework proposal and research propositions, which show the concepts and the relation among them
8 Discussion	Results, limitations and future research discussion	Rigor, reliability and validity of results	Validity legitimacy and procedure usage reliability

Table 1.
Meta synthesis
protocol

Source: Adapted from [Hoon \(2013\)](#)

journals. The main journals were *Industrial Marketing Management*, *Journal of Advertising Research*, *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research* and *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, all of which had eight studies. Both the *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management* and the *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Service* had six studies. The others had five or fewer publications.

In the third step, 25 studies were selected for the meta-synthesis with the case study. A complete reading of the 25 studies was performed to verify if they were in the investigation scope. This eliminated another 18 studies (Table 2).

Criteria	Justification	References and Exclusion Reasons
1 Qualitative Case Study	The exclusion of studies that neither had a qualitative approach nor used the case study methodology	186 quantitative studies were removed: 2 studies that used secondary data; 2 meta-analysis; 5 studies with mixed-methodology; 1 used grounded theory; 1 did a comparative analysis; 1 used action research; 1 did a discourse analysis; 7 studies used content analysis
2 Conceptual Models and Literature Reviews	Although considered important for scientific development, theoretical study papers do not fulfill the objective to use the primary data found in the empirical studies	Albers, Raman, and Lee (2015) , Batra and Keller (2016) , Bolos, Idemudia, Mai, Rasinghani, and Smith (2016) , Chen and Gao (2019) , Drechsler and Weißschädel (2018) , Flaherty et al. (2018) , Habibi, Hamilton, Valos, and Callaghan (2015) , Hofacker, Malthouse, and Sultan (2016) , Lin, Swarna, and Bruning (2017) , Lindsey-Mullikin and Borin (2017) , Marolt, Pucihar, and Zimmermann (2015) , Ioanid, Militaru and Mihai (2015) , Moncrief (2017) , Moncrief, Marshall, and Rudd (2015) , Nunan, Sibai, Schivinski, and Christodoulides (2018) , Oh (2017) , Orozco (2016) , Papp-Vary (2015) , Rane, Mulla, Sarguru, and Sayed (2017) , Roch and Mosconi (2016) , Rodriguez et al. (2016) , Spragg (2017) , Thorat, Deshpande, and Shaga (2017) , Zhao and Balagué (2015)
3 Studies not Accessible for search	Studies that were not in English and not available for download	5 studies not available for download and 1 in Arabic
4 Adequate Scope to Research Question	Only studies in which the scope aligned with the research question were considered	Brink (2017) focuses only on social media use. Mahapatra Ramani, and Kulkarni (2019) focus on the B2B market but does not mention social media use and sales process. Annett-Hitchcock and Xu (2015) , Arriaga, Andreu Domingo, and Berlanga Silvente (2017) , Bohlin, Shaikh, and Hanafizadeh (2018) , de Brito Silva, Santana, and da Costa (2018) , Garner, Goldberg, and Pou (2017) , Gilfoil, Aukers, and Jobs (2015) , Jones, Borgman, and Ulusoy (2015) , Kim, Dwivedi, Zhang, and Jeong (2016) , Mirza (2014) , Nicoli and Papadopoulou (2017) , Shemi and Procter (2018) , Valos, Haji Habibi, Casidy, Driesener, and Maplestone (2016) are B2C studies. Mauroner (2016) investigates social media impact in the creative process and Sanakulov et al. (2018) verify how salespeople use social media

Table 2.
Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Source: Adapted from [Hoon \(2013\)](#)

The selected studies for the meta-synthesis are listed in Table 3. It can be observed that six of them were published in journals A1 (H Index > 24) and one classified as A2 (24 ≤ H Index < 9) according to the QUALIS from CAPES criteria, which indicates high-impact journals. Table 4 shows the coding and extraction of data. The final guide had 42 items.

Data analysis

After data coding, seven selected articles were analyzed, and a transversal level synthesis was realized. It was possible to suggest a theoretical framework and present research propositions with this data.

Table 3.
Articles

Author(s) (year)	Title	Journal	SJR* (H index)
Andersson and Wikström (2017)	Why and how are social media used in a B2B context, and which stakeholders are involved?	<i>Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing</i>	55
Bocconcelli <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Social media as a resource in SMEs' sales processes	<i>Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing</i>	55
Cron (2017)	Macro sales force research	<i>Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management</i>	55
Järvinen and Taiminen (2016)	Harnessing marketing automation for B2B content marketing	<i>Industrial Marketing Management</i>	106
Karjaluo <i>et al.</i> (2015)	The role of digital channels in industrial marketing communications	<i>Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing</i>	55
Lashgari <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Adoption strategies of social media in B2B firms: a multiple case study approach	<i>Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing</i>	55
Lipiäinen (2015)	CRM in the digital age: Implementation of CRM in three contemporary B2B firms	<i>Journal of Systems and Information Technology</i>	17

Notes: SJR – Scimago Journal & Country Rank. Retrieved on July 29, 2019 from Retrieved from www.scimagojr.com/
Source: The authors (2019)

Table 4.
Coding and
extraction data
criteria

Items for Analysis	Items detailing
General Information	Author(s), title, journal, year, and kind of study
What are the Authors' Intentions?	Objectives, survey questions, and theoretical contributions
Theoretical Framework	How social media use and sales process are conceptualized. How the study discusses the relation between the concepts in the B2B business
Context Definition	Country, industry/sector, context, local and research alignment
Methodology	Research design, approach, analysis unit, number of cases, and sampling strategy
Techniques and Data Collection Sources	Data collection techniques, source and data management
Data Analysis	Methods and data analysis techniques
What are the Insights?	Main results and insights
Discussion	Findings discussion, theoretical/managerial contributions, and limitations
General Evaluation	Relevance evaluation and research reliability

Source: Adapted from Hoon (2013)

Case-specific level analysis

To be able to develop this meta-synthesis from each selected case study, the causal relations between the variables (social media use and sales process) were confirmed. A theoretical framework was elaborated from the synthesis information of each case (Figure 1).

This framework gathers the main results of each analyzed study. Social media use encompasses the development of content to be published in social media (Lashgari et al., 2018). Other already consolidated tools in marketing and sales, such as CRM, continue to be used by companies. Because of the influence of social media, it is suggested that CRM be used along with social media (Cron, 2017) and thus it is presented as a social CRM concept (Lipiäinen, 2015). It is suggested that a company use social media in conjunction with the content marketing technique (material and text creation) published in different online media and with the support of other available tools. These technologies influence the sales process (Bocconcelli, Cioppi, & Pagano, 2017; Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016; Karjaluoto, Mustonen & Ulkuniemi, 2015); however, they are modified when used because social media use and sales process stages suffer each other's influence. Finally, social media use in the sales process stages generates benefits for the organization (Andersson & Wikström, 2017; Bocconcelli et al., 2017; Karjaluoto et al., 2015; Lipiäinen, 2015).

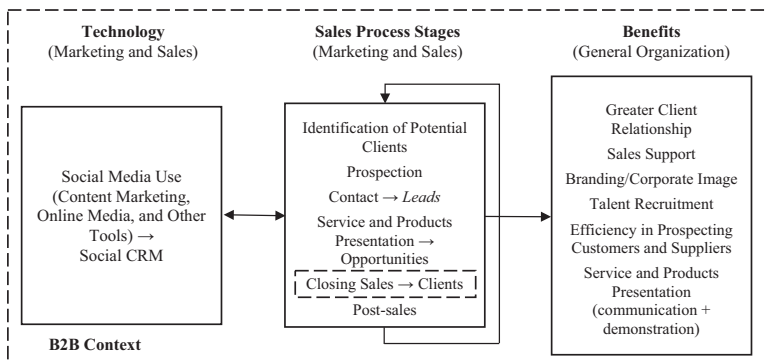
The proposed framework shows that the functional marketing and sales areas should be integrated (Andersson & Wikström, 2017; Bocconcelli et al., 2017) because the stages that form the process have activities in both areas. However, closing sales is a task with commercial intent and is directly realized with clients. In the B2B context, clients perform repetitive purchases, and the focus in this market is to create loyal relationships (Chang, 2014); therefore, clients that have gone through the post-sales stage can become potential clients again, i.e. prospects or leads. Because of the small number of clients, they end up purchasing again from the supplier, which strengthens the necessity to include a post-sales step.

The detail on how these presented relationships were identified is displayed in the following topics.

Transversal level study synthesis

The transversal analysis aimed to show the relation between the variables (meta-causal). A mapping was done, which was displayed in summary in Table 5.

Table 5 shows the main insights and highlights the essential information for the development of the proposed framework.



Source: The authors (2019)

Figure 1.
Meta causal net

Table 5.
Articles information
for the Meta-
Synthesis
development

Article	Objective	Concepts	Relation between Variables	Contributions
1	Explore why and how the B2B business uses social media and how its stakeholders communicate through these media	Digital media is a communication platform, promote a relationship with all stakeholders. The sales process involves multiple participants	Salespeople use social media to share information, present services, and create customer value	They confirm social media use by B2B companies in communication activities to increase sales and to build their brands. However, they amplify their findings showing social media use as a collaborator recruiting tool, prospection, and product and service display for clients (post-sales)
2	Explore the social media impact of adoption in the sales process in small and medium companies	Social media is a group of internet applications that permit the creation and sharing of contents The authors do not conceptualize the sales process, they talk about e-selling concept which is active sales where there is an online interaction with clients	Social media is used as a marketing and commercial area resource It is a support in the sales process stages	Social media is a valuable resource for communication and sales realization. Its use has increased enterprise visibility analyzed in the foreign market, besides permitting relationship maintenance with foreign clients and providing sales process support. The sales approach has become better planned and pro-active
3	Research the sales force in a macro perspective. Thus, the organizational strategic evolution has been drastically changing this sales force role These changes are analyzed through five sales capabilities listed in the "The Strategic Role" article	Social media and CRM systems are considered as a digital technology that impacts sales force. The author mentions only sales process complexity. The sales funnel and the prospection is mentioned along the text	Digital technology influences sales force for it is capable to generate a value proposition that creates a relationship with client's needs	Sales force communicates a value proposition. It is required for a client relationship in the long term. Only sales support is not enough
4	Identify what benefits the B2B companies can have when using marketing tools. Examine how to combine marketing content use in	Social media are online channels to share contents. The sales process comprises the sales funnel stages: suspects, prospects, leads, e-deals	Present marketing content and marketing automation concepts. The objective is to offer support in the sales funnel stages	Identify social media use in the sales funnel stages. Discuss the integration between marketing and sales showing the results in sales support, prospection, client

(continued)

Article	Objective	Concepts	Relation between Variables	Contributions
5	sales. Illustrate how marketing and sales systems are integrated Investigate the use of marketing communication tools and digital channels	Social media are support platforms to promote social interaction. The authors do not conceptualize the sales process but mention the prospecting, leads creation, and client's acquisition Social media are platforms categorized into four groups: blogs, online communities, microblog, and social nets. The authors only mention leads creation in sales	They relate the communication present on social media with the prospecting, leads creation, and client's acquisition stages Each content created in social media attends to a specific objective, one of them being leads creation. Social media facilitates communication and dissemination of information which helps in sales since it offers sales support to display services and products The author confirms the relation between social media and sales but does not detail the stages, which becomes implicit since the CRM comprises these steps	relationship, and corporate image building The literature indicates three social media use objectives and the study offers support to two of them: client relationship and sales support. They find partial support in social media communication use focused on leads creation The authors develop a model of social media and communication adoption. Social media helps the creation of leads. In general, the published information in social media contributes to the growth of business and promotes innovation
6	Explore the factors that contribute to the adoption of marketing and communication strategies in the use of social media in small and medium-sized B2B companies	Social media is a technology to build and maintain client relationships; in addition, to offer support to information gathering and leads creation. The sales process is a compound of CRM stages		The author presents "Social CRM" concept. Social media and CRM are the tools and technologies used to achieve marketing strategies. Social media alters the research about sales since it influences the whole process
7	Understand the CRM use and its relation to social media			

Notes: 1 – [Andersson and Wikström \(2017\)](#); 2 – [Bocconcelli et al. \(2017\)](#); 3 – [Cron \(2017\)](#); 4 – [Järvinen and Taiminen \(2016\)](#); 5 – [Karjaluoto et al. \(2015\)](#); 6 – [Lashgari et al. \(2018\)](#); 7 – [Lipäinen \(2015\)](#)
Source: The authors (2019)

Table 5.

Theory development from meta synthesis and results discussion

The studies of social media use and its relation to B2B negotiations offer a partial view about the theme. This meta-synthesis proposes a wide framework that embraces the main results in the research area using the case study method (Hoon, 2013).

From the articles that were analyzed, it is proposed that social media use is a tool that comprises as much the creation as the exchange of content by users (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The studies mentioned some of these tools, such as Facebook, Instagram and Youtube, as well as suggesting explanations about their use (Andersson & Wikström, 2017; Bocconcelli et al., 2017; Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016). Lipiäinen (2015) and Cron (2017) highlighted the CRM tool. Lipiäinen (2015) discussed the CRM social concept and showed the strong social media influence in the tools already used in the marketing area.

Järvinen & Taiminen (2016) presented the requirement for greater integration between sales and marketing areas. The objective was the use of fewer resources for the leads qualification stage, leaving more options to apply in all sales processes. This integration resulted in a greater volume of qualified leads and resource optimization. Another benefit was the sales support; however, with resource optimization, there was a possibility of increased focus on the relationship between consumers and salespeople, which generated better results in the long-term (Andersson & Wikström, 2017).

This integration between consumers and salespeople is benefited by better communication, which is only possible with greater agility in the process, knowledge about message monitoring and use of media and online tools (Bocconcelli et al., 2017; Karjaluoto et al., 2015). This justifies the requirement to propose a framework that shows the visualization of social media use and its impact on the sales process.

The discussion about the integration between sales and marketing areas in the use of social media in sales activities (Bocconcelli et al., 2017; Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016; Karjaluoto et al., 2015) is relevant in the literature. Thus, it is proposed:

- P1.* Social media use should be performed by sales and marketing areas that enjoy the benefits of this integration.

In addition to social media and CRM, marketing automation, content marketing, e-mail use, and blogging, are tools found in studies (Andersson & Wikström, 2017; Bocconcelli et al., 2017), but this does not prevent social media from being a post-sales tool or a prospection; however, more studies in the area are necessary. For these reasons, it was decided to study the use of social media as a whole and not specify each media. These media frequently change (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) and it is as difficult to understand them as it is to identify qualified professionals to use them adequately (Andersson & Wikström, 2017).

In addition to social media and CRM tools, marketing automation, content marketing, e-mail use and blogging, are found in studies (Andersson & Wikström, 2017; Bocconcelli et al., 2017; Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016; Karjaluoto et al., 2015; Lashgari et al., 2018; Lipiäinen, 2015). This fact reinforces the requirement to understand the importance of social media use and its influence, i.e. its logic of use and not the specific application of each media because they change constantly. The use in the sales process steps brings the companies benefits, including client relationship and sales support (Andersson & Wikström, 2017; Bocconcelli et al., 2017; Karjaluoto et al., 2015; Lashgari et al., 2018; Lipiäinen, 2015), improved corporate image and branding (Andersson & Wikström, 2017; Karjaluoto et al., 2015) and help in talent recruitment, prospection, service and product presentation (Andersson & Wikström, 2017; Bocconcelli et al., 2017):

- P2.* The use of social media (content marketing, online media and other tools) in the sales process stages creates benefits to organizations such as better relationship

with clients, sales support, improvement of the corporate image and brand, help with talent recruitment, enhanced prospection of clients and suppliers and services and products presentation.

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There is consensus in the literature that social media use offers sales support; however, the inclusion of all stages in a single framework is a differential. Post-sales is a great application stage in the business accomplishment among companies because of its impact on client relationship and maintenance contact (Bocconcelli et al., 2017; Chang, 2014). For this reason, it must not be left out of the proposed model. Moreover, all the proposed stages demand tasks that can be done by sales and marketing, which are areas that must work together (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016; Karjaluo et al., 2015). B2B sales process suffers social media use influence. After client contact is made, this process again influences social media because it promotes client interaction and engagement with the value proposal creation (Bocconcelli et al., 2017; Cron, 2017). Thus, a third proposition is presented:

- P3a.* Social media use influences sales processes, composed of the stages of identification of potential clients, prospection, contact with clients, service and products presentation, closing sales and post-sales.
- P3b.* Social media use is a mediator between the sales process stages and the benefits generated for the organization.

The interaction occurs all the time. The organization interacts with clients in social media and they provide information. Much more optimized content is published because of this constant exchange. The value is then co-created between the parties because both manifest themselves in the sales process (Lipiäinen, 2015). Cron (2017) emphasized that this interaction brings a value proposal. This joint work (social media in the B2B sales process) offers benefits to the companies such as improved customer assistance and content offerings adequate to the client's expectations.

There are three benefits consolidated in the literature and recurrently appearing in the analyzed articles (greater client relationships, sales support and corporate image/branding). This study has identified three other benefits and has added them to the proposed framework (Karjaluo et al., 2015; Andersson & Wikström, 2017; Bocconcelli et al., 2017).

Finally, the discussion about CRM social concept in a B2B context (Lipiäinen, 2015) reinforces social media relevance. Its use has been changing the way companies operate already consolidated tools such as CRM, thus modifying the business model, including B2B negotiations.

Final considerations

The general objective has been achieved because the building of a theoretical framework was obtained from data found in empirical studies according to the meta synthesis method (Hoon, 2013). Three theoretical contributions have been shown:

- (1) social media use demands activities in the marketing and sales areas;
- (2) social media use influences the sales process stages and brings a series of benefits to companies; and
- (3) social media influences the sales process stages while acting as a mediator in the relation between these stages and the identified benefits.

Research about social media use and B2B sales processes are fragmented; the present study permitted a wide framework view. The qualitative case studies offered relevant information for developing this model and to verify repetitive information among studies. The relevance of these concepts to the problem proposed in the research has been demonstrated. The selected

cases were published between 2015 and 2018, which shows the current importance of this theme. Conceptual study models were found, reinforcing the existence of opportunities for research and theory development. Comparisons among different studies are necessary to discuss and consolidate the concepts in the area while new studies can complement this study. Future research can test the proposed framework and increase the understanding of the consequences of social media use using large-, medium- and small-sized companies.

It is a consensus in the literature that social media use helps the relationship with clients, branding and sales support. However, its use extrapolates these points. According to Lipiäinen (2015) and Cron (2017), social media use is much more than a sales and support technology; it is an essential element in value co-creation. Future studies could advance the understanding of this interaction between business and clients in the creation of a value proposal (Cron, 2017), thus investigating and measuring client engagement during the sales process.

A limitation of this study is the number of studies using the case study method about the theme, only seven articles being analyzed. Despite the existence of but a few studies, they were published in high-impact journals, which shows the relevance of the analysis and its potential contribution to future studies.

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